PARENTS OF US ALL

May 10, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 21:15-19
Genesis 12:1-4

**"I will bless you, and make your name great,...
Abram was seventy-five years old..."**
-Genesis 12:2, 4 (NRSV)

Robert Browning surely had Abraham in mind when he wrote a poem many preachers will haul out and quote some Sunday in May, it being Older Adults Month:

"Grow old along with me
The best is yet to be.
The last of life for which the first was made..."

For Abraham that was true. Rabbi Kushner says somewhere that life begins when the mortgage is paid, the last child moves out of your home and the dog dies. We don't know much about Abraham and Sarah beforehand, but we do know that at the age of seventy-five life becomes very interesting. In fact, there is a sense in which Abraham's life really begins at seventy-five. And unlike the Kushner formula about an empty nest and no dog to worry about, it doesn't mean a lessening of responsibility and activity and excitement. On the contrary at seventy-five Abraham's life begins to pick up pace. The real meaning and purpose of his life begins to appear. God confronts him, calls him to pick up and move, and of all things, promises that Abraham and Sarah will be parents of a great nation. And in case you miss the point, Genesis 12:4 reads "Abraham was seventy-five years old when he left Haran."

God repeats the promise along the way but Abraham keeps getting older until at the age of ninety-nine God reappears, repeats the promise. Sarah laughs - but becomes pregnant. Isaac is born. They are, what we would call "older adults." We can't be sure how the Genesis writer is measuring time, but the consistent references to Abraham's and Sarah's age, their aging, is an important motif. Something different and critical is being affirmed in the remarkable saga of these two wonderful older adults.

Aging is a time of promise and continuing blessing in the Bible, a time of wisdom and completion and ripeness. The Bible looks forward to old age. The Hebrew word for "Elder" is the same word for "leader." The old are respected, honored, venerated. For Abraham, essentially the first historical character to appear in the Bible, life at seventy-five accelerates in pace and productivity and takes on new intensity and vigor. It certainly doesn't decline and diminish. [See Homiletics, January-March 1992, p. 43]

Hebrew culture developed a unique view of aging and the place of older persons. The Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long..." is not exclusively focused on parents and children in one nuclear family. Rather, that commandment focuses on the whole culture and seeks to establish a social order which respects age, values, uses, assigns responsibility to and for its elders. Some scholars conclude that the Fifth Commandment was an alternative to the pagan practice among the other tribes and nations of abandoning the elderly when they were incapable of taking care of themselves. The elders in Israel were regarded as the parents of the nation - whether or not they were actual parents was not the point. It's an important understanding, I think... Older adults are "Parents of Us All."

It is a topic relevant for all of us in the most existential of ways. It is not at all an abstraction. We have aging parents or we know someone who does. We live near someone who is an older adult. And, most important of all, we are aging. It is not immediately apparent to the young, but getting old is what we do if we are fortunate. Adlai Stevenson was not the only person to observe in the middle of those birthday laments about getting older that having another birthday is vastly better than the alternative!

There is a wonderful chapter on "normal aging" in Lewis Thomas's new book The Fragile Species. Thomas, who is a distinguished scientist, observes that in the larger world of mammals, aging is a human phenomenon and a fairly recent one. Most animals, he observes, do not age in the wild. When they slow down a step, the end is near. Only our house pets and zoo animals mirror this anthropologically unique and wonderfully human phenomenon of getting old.

Thomas, who is also a physician, says that our cultural problem is in viewing aging as a disease with a resultant revulsion and, at times, mean belittling of our elders in trivial television and Hollywood attempts at humor; and there are widespread and very lucrative industries dedicated to the avoidance and denial of aging.

It's time to think in new ways about aging. Thomas and others are saying today, or perhaps from our Judeo-Christian perspective, it's time to look back and recover an older way of thinking; all the way back to Abraham.

In any event, it's necessary to think in new ways because there are so many older Americans, approaching a now third of the population. In 1840 life expectancy in the country was 40. In 1930, it was 60, 1970 - 70. If you are 65 now, some statisticians are suggesting that actual life expectancy may be approaching 90. The gerontologists know that the body apparently is prepared to go on functioning to the age of 120 or 140, apart from disease. We don't actually wear out, they are telling us. We get sick.

And so, it is time to think in new ways. The traditional formula was to divide human life into three neat stages: youth - adulthood - old age; preparation - real life - decline; birth - maturity - death.

Today social scientists are suggesting that the old formula is totally wrong, and the latest pattern is four stages, or ages.

The first age - birth to twenty-one is for learning.

The second age - is the time of maturity and responsibility, career, child rearing, mortgages, stress.

The third age - is the new wrinkle (no pun intended). The third age, what we used to call the onset of old age - and where a lot of us are - is now called the "age of fulfillment." It is, because of the amazing increase in life expectancy, often the longest stage of our lives. At this age the questions used to be "Have you made peace with God?" or "Are you ready to go?" Today the question for the third age is "What are you going to do with the next 25 years of your life?"

The fourth age - when we are frail, and dependent, is coming later and lasting briefly, a radical and by-and-large hopeful evolution which has occurred in our lifetime. [op. cit.<u>Homiletics</u>]

The culture is lagging behind badly. The Biblical view that old age is a time of promise and productivity is in line with what is happening to us physically but not culturally.

What happens in the third age in our culture is not always pretty.

Lewis Thomas suggests that young physicians be required to read, in addition to textbooks on gerontology and geriatrics, the literature of aging. He proposes for instance Wallace Stegner,

distinguished American author. In one of Stegner's novels, The Spectator Bird, an elderly man receives a research questionnaire in the mail about self-esteem and reflects:

> "The self-esteem of the elderly declines in this society which indicates in every way that it does not value the old in the slightest, finds them an expense and an embarrassment, laughs at them, evades their problems, isolates them in hospitals and sunshine cities, and generally ignores them, except when soliciting their votes or whipping off their handbags and social security checks." [The Spectator Bird, in The Fragile Species, p. 74]

The realities of aging in our culture are not always pleasant. Only five percent of older Americans are living in institutions or retirement facilities. Ninety-five percent are either living alone or with families, often doing just fine, but frequently not: living with fear, for instance, fear of isolation and abandonment, fear of falling alone and not being discovered, fear that the rent will go up, or the buses won't run, fear of street crime. And sometimes the demonic convergence of a strong body, and the onset of Alzheimer's disease and the inadequacy of the health care system creates a virtual nightmare, and otherwise decent people have literally no alternative left to exercise. They tie an elderly father in a wheelchair and abandon him at a racetrack.

So we must all begin to think of new ways to catch up to reality, or more accurately, to recover the older and wiser view of aging. And the reasons are not altogether altruistic; not only, that is to say, because we ought to be more compassionate and kind, but because our current way of thinking about aging is so wasteful. Thomas says most Americans would opt for eternal youth, tennis court to death bed with no stops between, but at tremendous loss to the heart and soul of the culture. We need parents - "Parents of Us All."

There is a breadth of discernment which is available only to older persons. Erik Erikson knew about it when he said that "old age is a time of integrity, of absolute honesty." James Hilton who wrote the classic Goodbye, Mr. Chips observed, "One of the joys of growing older is you bother less about a lot of little things and care more about a few big things."

There is a breadth of discernment, a sense of what is really important and what is not actually very important at all, which simply doesn't show up in the human psyche for six or seven decades. Some cultures value it as wisdom. The Hebrew culture did. Some eastern cultures do. There is an ancient African saying that when an elderly person dies a library burns down.

And there is passion and intensity. Martin Marty reported sometime ago on a survey which revealed that the person most likely to be working for peace and justice in the world is your grandmother. The most politically active segment of the population is not college students, but the elderly.

British actress, Florida Scott Maxwell, said,

> "Age puzzles me. I thought it was a quiet time. My seventies were interesting and serene, but my eighties were passionate. I grow more intense with age. To my own surprise, I burst out in hot conviction. I have to calm down. I am too frail to indulge in moral fervor." (Thomas, p. 75)

There are, of course, limits... about which it seems best to maintain a sense of humor.

One of my favorite authors, John Updike, wrote a volume of poems, Facing Nature, on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday a few years ago. Here is one which describes a dilemma many of us have:

Typical Optical

"In the days of my youth
'Mid many a caper
I drew with my nose
A mere inch from the paper;
But now that I'm older
And of the elite
I find I can't focus
Inside of two feet.

"First pill-bottle labels
And telephone books
Began to go under
To my dirty looks;
Then want ads and box scores
Succumbed to the plague
Of the baffling quite
Unresolvably vague.

"Now novels and poems
By Proust and John Donne
Recede from my ken in
Their eight-point Granjon;
Long, long in the lens
My old eyeballs enfold
No print any finer
than sans-serif **bold.**"

No one does it better, of course, than George Burns, who a few years ago, in his 80s, booked himself at the Palladium for a performance on his one-hundredth birthday, and who said recently:

> "You know you're getting old when you stoop to tie your shoes and wonder what else you can do while you're down there." (Homiletics, op. cit.]

And Bruce Bliven, former editor of the New Republic: someone asked him what it felt like to be an old man. In his 70s, he said, "I don't feel like an old man. I feel like a young man with something the matter with him." Or the distinguished essayist Malcom Cowley in an essay "The View from Eighty": "We live by new rules. If you are wearing one brown shoe and one black shoe, quite possibly there is a similar pair in your closet." (op. cit. L. Thomas)

And, of course, Satchel Paige, who among many wise things asked, "How old you'd be if you didn't know how old you was?"

There are limits and it is best to smile at them and acknowledge and celebrate the fact that there are capacities which, in fact, continue to improve over the years.

Some are suggesting that memory increases with age. There are studies to prove that the ability to memorize increases. Other research suggests that IQ improves. Short-term recall may decline or be crowded out by increased long-term memory. There's a lot to remember and the longer we live the better we get at it.

And creativity - the list is stunning. Pablo Casals, practicing daily into his 90s and when someone asked him why, saying, "I think I'm beginning to see some improvement":

Grandma Moses
Bertrand Russell
Picasso
Albert Schweitzer
Winston Churchill

And is there a better actress working today than Jessica Tandy?

And freedom. Someone told Artur Rubenstein that in his 80s he was playing better than ever. He responded:

> "I think so. Now I take chances I never took before. You see, the stakes are not so high. I can afford it. I used to be so much more careful. No wrong notes. Not too bold ideas. Now I let go and enjoy myself and to hell with everything except the music."

Our religion has an important word for us to hear and to speak. It is a new word but in a sense it is one of our oldest ideas. And, it is a word enhanced magnificently by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is this:

Age knows some things which youth is only in the process of learning. Among them are these:

- that aging is and can be a process of growing, and

- that life is even more precious and beautiful and intense and therefore creative and productive and purposeful from the perspective of years, and

- that with an accumulation of decades comes some lovely surprises: discernment, wisdom and freedom.

And mysteriously, with age comes a trust in God's good providence, a confidence that nothing separates us from God's love in Jesus Christ and that the last enemy turns out not to be an enemy at all.

We need that. We need people who know those things. Older adults may need younger people, but when the final tally is in, not nearly as much as young people need their elders... "Parents of Us All."

Browning was right.

> "The best is yet to be.
> The last of life for which the
> first was made...."

And then he continued -

> "Our times are in his hand
> Who saith, 'A whole I planned:
> youth shows but half;
> trust God; see all; nor be afraid.'"

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God of all the years, we thank you for the majesty and mystery of human life; for its growing, aging and becoming, in your good providence, what you intended it to be. Bless the parents of us all, our wise elders; and bless us each on our way: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.